

Emmet (J. A.)

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MEMOIR

OF

JAMES MARION SIMS, M.D., LL.D.

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THOMAS ADDIS EMMET, M. D.



REPRINTED FROM

THE NEW YORK MEDICAL JOURNAL FOR JANUARY 5, 1884.

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DR. JAMES MARION SIMS.*

JAMES MARION SIMS sprang from the Scotch-Irish stock who settled up the frontiers of North Carolina and eastern Tennessee.

Many years ago, while investigating for my pleasure a point of local history, I was struck with the frequent mention of the name of Sims in this section of country, and, on inquiry, learned from the doctor that his family first settled on the frontier, and, after the Revolution, his grandparents, I believe, returned to the "settlements."

In Lancaster District, S. C., Dr. Sims was born, January 25, 1813. Of his boyhood I have heard him state that he was a good boy, but a dull one at school—scarcely a just criticism, I think. He may have been wanting in application, but, if the man was any indication of the boy, there could have been no time of his life when he would have been dull in any sense of the term. In 1832 he closed his academic studies, and received the degree of Bachelor of Arts from the College of South Carolina, at Columbia. He began the study of medicine in the office of Dr. B. C. Jones, a practitioner of Lancaster, and his first course of lectures

* Read before the New York Academy of Medicine, January 3, 1884.

was taken in the Medical College of Charleston, S. C. The following year he received his degree from the Jefferson Medical College, Philadelphia.

He returned to the place of his birth to commence the practice of his profession, but, not receiving a sufficient encouragement from those who had known him from childhood, he removed to Mount Meiggs, a settlement a few miles from Montgomery, in the State of Alabama. In 1836 he married Miss Eliza T. Jones, the daughter of his old preceptor, and remained a year longer at Mount Meiggs; then he practised about three years in Macon County, and finally settled at Montgomery about 1840.

He seemed to have made but little progress during the first year; but shortly after this time he became interested in the operation for strabismus, which had been recently devised by Dieffenbach, and, having been able to put it successfully in practice, together with a remarkable cure he effected in a case of club-foot, he gained a surgical practice which in a few years became one of the largest in the State. His first contribution to medical literature was a paper on "*Trismus Nascentium*," which was published in the "*American Journal of the Medical Sciences*" in 1846.*

In July, 1845, Dr. Sims was called to a patient who had been thrown from a carriage and was suffering from a retroversion in consequence of the accident. During his effort to restore the uterus he placed her in what is now termed the "knee-and-chest position"; but, finding that he could not readily reach the womb with the index-finger alone, he introduced the second one, with the immediate effect that he could then neither touch the cervix nor the walls of the vagina, and, to his surprise, she announced that she was

* Since writing the foregoing I have ascertained that his first contribution was "*On the Extraction of Foreign Bodies from the Meatus Auditorius Externus*," published in the same journal, vol. ix, 1845.

entirely relieved. To this accident, and to the dilatation of the vagina when placed in a certain position after retracting the perinaeum with the fingers, we are indebted for the speculum bearing his name, and for the first operation by him in a case of vesico-vaginal fistula.

In the anniversary discourse delivered by Dr. Sims before this body on the 18th of November, 1857, the subject being "Silver Sutures in Surgery," he had given a most graphic description of the difficulties overcome, and of the many disappointments he experienced during some four or five years before he cured his first case. This success was gained June 21, 1849, by the use of silver wire, after thirty failures, in this individual alone, to close the opening by means of silk.

Shortly after this triumph, and with a most prosperous future before him, his health failed, and he became a sufferer from chronic diarrhoea. It was a type of the disease which seemed particularly fatal at that time, and equally so if contracted in the Southern States or in Mexico, from which country so many of the troops were then returning home after the war to die from this malady. For two years or more Dr. Sims sought to regain his health by a change of climate, and with any improvement would return to his business, but finally was obliged to relinquish it entirely.

In October, 1851, while in Philadelphia, and when in the last extremity of the disease, as he supposed, he dictated a paper on "Vesico-Vaginal Fistula," which embodied his experience up to that date, and this was published in the "American Journal of the Medical Sciences" for January, 1852.

Dr. Sims had observed, during a number of visits to New York, that the only improvement in his health occurred while he remained in the city. Early in the autumn of 1853 he decided to settle permanently in New York, and

in November of that year I first made his acquaintance. With a growing family, and now in straitened circumstances, it was necessary to select a house at a moderate rent, and on the outskirts of the city. This building, which had just been erected, was situated in Madison Avenue, between Twenty-eighth and Twenty-ninth Streets. To the best of my recollection it stood alone, with no first-class dwelling-house nearer than Twenty-third^{*} Street, and in full view of the East River. I happened to be walking with a mutual friend, and had never heard of Dr. Sims before. His sign suggested the visit, and I had the choice of going in or of standing on the street. I was introduced, and then little thought how close our future relations were to be, or that this man, so emaciated and apparently at death's door, was about to enter upon a career which was to be of world-wide renown. I could then as little realize the future as I could have foreseen the growth of the city from its then limits to its present bounds.

In October, 1853, Dr. Sims received from Dr. Mott his first patient in New York—a small vesico-vaginal fistula, where the neck of the uterus was found in the bladder, a condition then regarded as unique. But this is now well known to be a common result from retroversion, when produced by inflammatory shortening of both broad ligaments, and where, the slough having taken place directly in front of the cervix, it easily passed into the bladder, and, with the cicatrization afterward, the opening became reduced in size. Dr. Sims successfully closed this fistula, but left the neck of the uterus in the bladder, and reported the case in the first volume of the "American Medical Monthly," published in this city, February, 1854.

Soon after his arrival, he formed the acquaintance of Dr. Barker, Dr. Mott, Dr. Francis, Dr. Stevens, and others, and it was thought advisable that Dr. Sims should deliver

an address to the profession setting forth the necessity for a woman's hospital, where vesico-vaginal fistula and a few of the injuries of childbirth might be treated. Little thought was given at that time to the need for any special place or treatment for the diseases of women. I well recollect a statement made by Dr. David M. Reese, now many years dead, but at that time a prominent general practitioner and a fair surgeon, that it was easy to apply the nitrate of silver through a cylindrical speculum to any case of ulceration; an infusion of red-oak bark could be given for a leucorrhœa, and, if a prolapse existed, any one could put in a Meigs's ring or Physick's spherical pessary. He laughed at the idea of the necessity for a woman's hospital, and thought it impossible to find enough women sick enough to fill it. What a contrast between such a statement and our knowledge of to-day! This gentleman felt satisfied that he had mastered the whole subject in treating these three conditions, which, as symptoms of different pathological changes, would not to-day convey alone to any one a knowledge of the true lesion. This appeal was made by Dr. Sims at the Stuyvesant Institute, in Broadway opposite Bond Street. It was judiciously arranged in regard to the speakers that it should prove a success, and the indorsement there given him by the profession was the beginning. I attended this meeting, which was held May 18, 1854, and from that time to the present I have been familiar with every circumstance connected with the development of the Woman's Hospital. In fact, if the history of this institution is ever to be written, it must be done from the information which I alone can furnish, for no one is now living who could do so much.

As Dr. Sims's career was so closely identified with the early history of the Woman's Hospital, it is necessary that I should make some reference to those who aided him in the good work. All credit must be given Dr. Sims for the con-

ception of the Woman's Hospital, as well as for the power of impressing others with the necessity of its existence, and his name must be for ever identified with the institution as the originator. But he had none of the qualifications of an organizer, and his conception would not have even reached a realization without the aid of others. Every one, I believe, connected with the movement has received more or less credit from some source, with a single exception. I entered upon this subject with the object of recording what I know to be true, and had written out my recollections without the knowledge of the gentleman to a point where it was necessary then to consult him in regard to certain data which he could alone furnish. I refer to our President, and believe that to Dr. Fordyce Barker, more than to any other individual, we are indebted for the early organization of the Woman's Hospital. Dr. Barker was about the first acquaintance made by Dr. Sims in the medical profession after settling in this city, and it was through him he became acquainted with Dr. Mott, Dr. Francis, Dr. Stevens, and others. Dr. Barker took an active part in the meeting, and just after, in the June number of the "American Medical Monthly," wrote an editorial article on Dr. Sims's claims, entitled "Young America *vs.* British Surgery." The points are well taken against a surgeon of St. Mary's Hospital, London, who had reported two cases of vesico-vaginal fistula, operated on by him, in which he used Sims's position, speculum, silver sutures, and self-retaining catheter without the slightest credit being given to any one but himself. The editor's advice—"Fie, Mr. Bull, set a better example before your young men; if you get an idea from young America, have the manliness to say so"—was excellent, but it was not followed altogether, since we see sometimes, even at the present day, the force of a bad example.

At the first meeting held to form an organization, Dr.

Barker suggested, with a single exception, the names of all the ladies who constituted the first board of managers of the Woman's Hospital Association. He was at the time the family physician to all, with the single exception, and it was through his personal influence that these ladies were induced to assume the responsibility. Mrs. Fordyce Barker was the first secretary of this board, and discharged the duties for two years after its organization, in a position which, even under more favorable circumstances, would have been a thankless one. Soon after the hospital had gone into operation, Dr. Barker was able to render further service, while twice president of the State Medical Society, at Albany, and to prepare the way for obtaining from the Legislature the charter of the institution now known as the Woman's Hospital of the State of New York.

Dr. Francis, who knew every one, was a host in himself, and it was his special province to prepare, from time to time, the necessary appeals to the public and to the Legislature for obtaining the charter. Mr. Beekman, Mr. Benedict, and others, who formed the Board of Governors of the proposed State Hospital, and who were nearly all governors at the same time of the New York Hospital, obtained from the city a grant of the land for the site of the present institution, then a part of an old Potter's Field from which over thirty thousand bodies were removed. Through the efforts chiefly of Mrs. T. C. Doremus, a house was obtained in Madison Avenue, and her husband, I believe, became security for the rent. How much was due to the individual efforts of this noble woman will never be known; she kept her own counsel, but served the institution, even to the day of her death, with a most remarkable singleness of purpose. In brief, I have given an account of the chief movers in organizing this undertaking, a work which was physically impossible for a single individual to have performed. Dr.

Sims, however, did accomplish even a greater work in his own legitimate sphere, and this I will endeavor to trace.

The Woman's Hospital Association opened its doors May 4, 1855, and Mary Smith, the first patient received, suffered from a vesico-vaginal fistula, and had arrived from Ireland but a short time before.* She proved to be one of the worst cases ever admitted to the institution. To keep the fundus of the bladder from prolapsing through the vagina, some almshouse physician of her district had, before she left, introduced into the cavity a wooden float from a seine, in size not less than a closed fist, and this had become thoroughly coated with a phosphatic deposit. This miserable object was operated on over thirty times, almost always on the knees and chest, each operation lasting from two to three hours, without ever taking an anæsthetic, and she suffered during a period of nearly five years before even partial retention was gained. For a long time she was the "show-case" for demonstrating the mode of operating. After the opening had been closed, so much traction was then exerted on the urethra that more or less urine escaped while in the upright position, and in time, from this source of irritation, a stone was at length formed in the bladder. Against my advice, some years ago, the urethra was dilated for the removal of the stone, and the neck of the bladder was lacerated, with incontinence afterward, so that the first patient admitted to the hospital is still living in suffering, in poverty, and incurable.

The consulting board consisted at first of Dr. Francis, Dr. Mott, and Dr. Stevens; Dr. Green and Dr. Delafield were subsequently added. These gentlemen were all emi-

* I will mention the fact in passing that, up to ten years ago, when the records were examined, exactly fifty-eight per cent. of all the patients treated for vesico-vaginal fistula had been admitted, like this woman, directly from the different almshouses of Great Britain and from the Continent.

nent in their different branches of the profession, but were necessarily conservative in so new a field. Dr. Sims early evinced a boldness and desire to enter upon an investigation as to how far abdominal surgery could be made safe through the use of silver wire, and the difficulties would have been soon overcome if he could have had a portion of the responsibility shared by his consulting board. I was present, as a listener, at one of the early consultations, when Dr. Sims proposed to open the abdomen for the removal of a long pedunculated fibroid—an operation which few would hesitate in doing to-day. Dr. Francis and Dr. Mott were at first disposed to yield to Dr. Sims, until Dr. Stevens entered a protest. He had no opinion to express, he said, in regard to Dr. Sims's views; they might be all right, but he felt, if Dr. Sims should succeed by chance, that every young surgeon in the land would be ripping open the bellies of the young women to ascertain if they had such growths to be removed, and he would oppose such an operation simply on the ground of humanity. Dr. Sims was not able to carry out his wishes in regard to several cases of ovarian tumor, and it was not until about 1860 that he felt his position sufficiently established to perform, on his own responsibility, his first ovariectomy.

Dr. Sims visited Europe early in July, 1861; he remained absent until the middle of January, 1862, and, on August 31, 1862, he left New York with his family to reside abroad. During his service of six years and nine months in charge of the Woman's Hospital Association, his only contribution to medical literature was, I believe, the Address on "Silver Sutures in Surgery," and he seemed to have taken no active part in the proceedings of the medical societies. He was, however, most actively employed, and, with a gradual improvement in his health, he developed a remarkable tolerance, as it were, for hard work. He was

perfecting and devising new instruments, studying modes of exploration, and planning different surgical procedures, all in a field too new to find any precedent to aid him in the experience of others. In the midst of this busy life the civil war came on and cut short this continued strain to both mind and body. It proved, however, a fortunate circumstance for him and for his subsequent reputation. His residence in Europe gave him the leisure, and it became even a necessity, to perfect and utilize much which would otherwise have been lost.

Dr. Sims was by nature a surgeon, and one of the most dexterous operators I ever witnessed. He was bold and self-reliant, never at a loss, and his ingenuity was unequalled. He was in no sense a plodder, for his mind and body were always too restless and active. He was so fertile in resource when I first knew him that he perfected scarcely a tithe of the brilliant conceptions, passing constantly through his mind, and it was impossible to see him perform the most simple operation without learning something new. It may be held that, for want of further hospital advantages for study, Dr. Sims's creative power culminated when he left the Woman's Hospital. As his surgical reputation will be hereafter always intimately associated with what he had perfected before that time, I will briefly give a synopsis of his work:

In perfecting the preparatory treatment, in devising the needed instruments, and by overcoming the difficulties in operating for vesico-vaginal fistula, Dr. Sims exhibited a degree of pertinacity which in after-life he was unable to devote to the development of any other special object. Notwithstanding a similar speculum has been taken from the ruins of Pompeii, and a like instrument, as a retractor, had been used by Metzler, in Germany, before the present instrument had been devised by Dr. Sims, the credit in the future must belong to him alone. The metallic suture had

been used by Dr. Le Vert, of Mobile, Ala., before 1828, and by Mr. Gosset, of London, in 1834; the clamp suture had been already employed, with the "knee-and-chest position," and with other details now in use; while vesico-vaginal fistulæ had been successfully closed in different parts of the world before Dr. Sims began to study his profession. "Yet with all," as I have elsewhere stated, "were we assured of the fact that Dr. Sims was as familiar as we are at the present time with what had been accomplished before his day, it should not lessen the credit due him. What had been done fell on barren soil, bore no fruit, was not appreciated, and was destined to be forgotten. From Dr. Sims's hand the operation was accepted by the profession; it was immediately put into successful practice, and to the present day it has not been materially modified for the better in either its principles or its mode of execution."

I hold in my hand a speculum which belonged to Dr. Sims, and is, I believe, the first perfected one from the hands of the instrument-maker. From the beginning of time to the present I believe that the human race has not been benefited to the same extent, and within a like period, by the introduction of any other surgical instrument. Those who do not fully appreciate the value of the speculum itself have been benefited indirectly to an extent they little realize, for the instrument, in the hands of others, has probably advanced the knowledge of the diseases of woman to a point which could not have been reached for a hundred years or more without it. Those who come upon the field to-day can not realize what has been accomplished, or the fact that the study of gynecology now covers a more extended field than the whole knowledge of medicine did forty years ago. The advance made in this branch of surgery has, through this instrument, become especially identified with this country, where it has been chiefly employed.

To Dr. Sims we are indebted for the technique of the examination. He first suggested the advantage of employing the left hand and the use of conjoined manipulation. The advantages of "Sims's position" on the left side, I believe, can not be questioned. In addition to the speculum, we are indebted to him for the depressor, the flexible copper sound, the tenaculum now in use, and the elevator. He first introduced the use of glycerin and taught its advantages. He perfected the making of sponge-tents, and first understood how to apply a tampon, an operation which can never be performed properly without the use of his speculum. The stick, with the screw at the end, for removing the cotton, is his, and he introduced the probang sponge-holders now in use. He first had the block-tin pessary made, and from his hands I have seen formed, over twenty-five years ago, every shape and modification which has since been devised. Dr. Sims was the first to abandon that barbarous appliance, the quill suture, and to simplify the operation for closure of a lacerated perinæum by the use of the interrupted silver suture. He gave us the operation on the anterior wall of the vagina for the cure of procidentia and prolapse. And, notwithstanding it fails when used alone for keeping up the uterus, it is perfect if employed with the object of holding the uterus at a distal point from the pubes, while the needed support is obtained by the proper operation on the posterior wall. I could indefinitely extend the record of operations devised, but not carried out, and of instruments never perfected. There were certain operations practised by him which will go into disuse, and some of his teachings will not stand the test of time. But this is not to his discredit, for few men will ever have more to live after them. Crowded into a few years as were all of Dr. Sims's opportunities for clinical study in hospital practice, it is most remarkable that from the brain and hands of one

individual so much should have emanated and so perfected that the human race will be benefited long after the source has been forgotten.

I can not attempt to trace his career abroad, or give more than a general outline of this period of his life. He visited the chief cities of Europe, but resided for the greater portion of the time in Paris and London. He received marked attention everywhere, and at once entered upon a large and extended practice. In 1865, while residing in London, he wrote his "Clinical Notes on Uterine Surgery," and states in his preface: "It is simply a voice from the Woman's Hospital, which, in all probability, would never have been heard if I had remained at home." This book was translated into the French and German languages, and issued at the same time with the English edition, which was afterward reprinted in this country. The work attracted a great deal of interest, at the time of its issue, as a very remarkable one. I believe few medical works of its size were ever issued containing so much original and, I may say, suggestive matter. It was so far imperfect, or rather fragmentary, in character as to treat of a very limited range of diseases. But its publication was the turning point of modern gynæcology, or, more strictly speaking, American gynæcology, of which he may be justly termed the father. For the critic, however, this work had many weak points, as it was not a systematic production, and was never intended to be one. He had also advanced, with his enthusiastic zeal, certain views which were theoretical and would not stand the test of clinical experience. Withal, in the history of some cases there was a want of accuracy, as he had not access to the hospital records, and had to trust to his memory. It is now a source of no little regret, to those who fully appreciated the true value of the book, that Dr. Sims did not revise it and produce a systematic work embodying

his matured experience, of which so much has now been lost.

Several years after the departure of Dr. Sims for Europe a sufficient sum of money, by subscription, was collected through the personal efforts of Mr. A. R. Wetmore, the late Vice-President of the Board of Governors, and the cornerstone of what is termed, in recognition of this service, the Wetmore Pavilion of the Woman's Hospital was laid May 23, 1866. This building was completed on the 12th of October, 1867, and was then occupied by patients for the first time. The Woman's Hospital Association, which had consisted of a Board of Lady Managers, now ceased to exist as a distinct corporation, and became blended with the one in charge of the Woman's Hospital of the State of New York. After the hospital had been in full operation for a year or more, Dr. Sims returned to New York for a few months, having been absent some six years. In 1868 he was appointed one of the governors of the Woman's Hospital, and had conferred on him the honorary title of Senior Consulting Surgeon. He contributed, in 1869, to the eighth volume of the "New York Medical Journal," a paper "On the Microscope as an Aid in the Diagnosis and Treatment of Sterility," and it had been read by him before the Medical Society of the County of New York, December 7, 1868.

His family remained abroad and he was only a portion of each year in this country until after the Franco-Prussian War. While in Paris, the "Anglo-American Ambulance Corps" was organized, August 27, 1870, by eight American and the same number of English surgeons, with Dr. Sims as surgeon-in-chief. He was the eldest surgeon who left Paris for this duty, and, arriving just at the commencement of the battle of Sedan, he was placed in charge of a military hospital containing four hundred beds, and served as chief for

a month or more. Shortly after rendering this service he returned with his family to New York.

Dr. Sims was appointed, January 9, 1872, a member of the Board of Surgeons to the Woman's Hospital, but the new organization was not fully completed, and he did not enter regularly upon his duties until the following 1st of May. On the 1st of December, 1874, Dr. Sims resigned, thus terminating his brief service as surgeon to the Woman's Hospital, and he had no further connection with the institution until shortly before his death, when he became one of the Consulting Board.

In the "New York Medical Journal," December, 1872, and April, 1873, he contributed an article on ovariectomy, in which he advocated free drainage, through Douglas's cul-de-sac, of the peritoneal cavity. Before the New York State Medical Society, Albany, February 6, 1874, he read a paper on "Intra-Uterine Fibroids," and this was published also in the "New York Medical Journal," April, 1874. Soon after, in the "History of the Discovery of Anæsthesia," he supported the claims of Dr. C. W. Long, of Athens, Ga., to the credit of having performed the first surgical operation with the patient under the effects of an anæsthetic. A few other articles in the various journals, of minor importance, and his addresses as presiding officer of several societies, would embrace all his contributions to medical science.

Dr. Sims was elected President of the American Medical Association, and presided at the meeting held in Philadelphia, 1876. He was president of the American Gynecological Society at its meeting in Cincinnati, Ohio, 1880, and was one of the founders of the society. In recognition of the service rendered by Dr. Sims to medical science he was the recipient of many honors from different governments of Europe, and probably few men in the profession

ever received an equal number of honorary distinctions from various societies in different parts of the world. One of the last honors conferred was that of Doctor of Laws from the Jefferson University, Canonsburg, Penn., with which his Alma Mater, the Jefferson Medical College, of Philadelphia, is connected.

Dr. Sims came of a long-lived family, and was remarkable for his temperate and simple mode of life. He had none of the "small vices," and every habit of life was made conducive to maintaining his health. He preserved to a late period a youthful figure, with a degree of elasticity and activity of body seldom enjoyed even in middle life. He thus had the promise of a long life, and he always said, as he expressed it, that he was "good for ninety." About two years ago, after a long and fatiguing operation, he was seized with an attack of pneumonia, and his life, day by day hanging in the balance, was only saved by the 'unremitting care of his medical attendants. He never fully recovered from this attack, and it necessitated the spending of the following winter in Florida, and the last in the south of Europe. During the warm weather he improved, and, on his return to New York in August last, it was thought that he had regained his former vigor and strength. To the day of his death he was actively engaged in the duties of his profession, and it is stated that he had visited a patient with his son just before retiring. During the night he was restless, and wrote for a time in bed, as was his custom. Suddenly his heart came to a standstill, and he died, without a struggle, November 13, 1883.

Mrs. Sims has survived her husband. A sketch of him would be incomplete without some notice of her, who continued as the sweetheart of his youth and help-mate through a long life. I have heard him state that he could have accomplished nothing without the aid and advice of his wife.

She certainly devoted her life to him, and I never saw a person more dependent on another than he was on her. When I first knew them, and he was in bad health, she always prepared with her own hands every particle of food he needed. She watched over him with a singleness of purpose only equaled in the care of a mother for her offspring. For his impulsive nature her placid disposition was as essential as the fly-wheel to an engine, and he has said that through his whole life he never had to regret following her advice.

My relations with Dr. Sims in early professional life were as close as that of a son could be. Later on, from circumstances over which I had no control, we did not meet for years. During the summer of 1882, and in London, while I was closely watching the steps of an operation, some one came into the room breathing quickly, as if he had been ascending the stairs. For a second of time I was annoyed as this gentleman sided up so close to me, but his hand passed into mine as he whispered, with a familiar voice, "How are you, old Emmet?" and I shook Dr. Sims by the hand for the last time.

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